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# Introduction: Volumes

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## Volumes

### Notes from the Editors

This special issue of the *JWS* seeks to examine the topic of gendered constructions of space(s). How does space structure our understanding of gender? How does it participate in cultural constructions of race, class, and sexuality? What are the political and economic dimensions of the spaces that we construct and that construct us?

Despite the many seminal studies of the role of space in the fields of architecture, geography, history, and cultural theory, the role of space in the field of women's studies remains underappreciated. In this issue we wanted to explore the role(s) that space plays in shaping and maintaining identities and power relations. Far from being neutral or self-evident, we take space to be a site and a means of cultural power, informed by a set of historically and culturally specific notions that are loaded in gender and class terms.

Like discourse, space is always political. Space can discipline by restricting access, and empower by giving presence. Spatial organization is a historical and cultural product of meshing and clashing discourses of the body, sexuality, and morality. Instead of being "neutral," our notions of space are informed by a set of gender, class, and race terms. Therefore, the everyday spaces of our homes, offices, streets, and cities not only reflect existing social relations and identities but also actively produce and re-produce them.

Each essay in this issue shows in its own way that space needs to be recognized as a central component of power that is socially constituted through material relations. Combined, the authors adopt a space framework for critical, rhetorical, and cultural scholarship, and thus lead us to see the many social meanings of space as it structures the operation of gender.

This issue is entitled "Volumes," because we felt there must be a lot to say about space and gender in an era of outsourcing and global economies; rapidly changing social mores; and the radical miniaturization of everyday objects. Indeed, we received 188 submissions--a testimony to the popularity and value of the topic. The essays we are pleased to present here range widely in style, subject matter, and geographical foci, as befitting our sense that there is much to say. They are linked by their analysis of the adroit means by which social actors manipulate space for their own ends while being undeniably shaped by it; they are linked further by their commitment to the insights that spatial analysis is uniquely capable of providing.

Such examination of space has to be interdisciplinary and multi-media. We have included scholarly essays, poetry, art, photography, and book reviews. In exploring a range of spaces, we wanted to go beyond the usual spatial binaries of public and private, centrist and border. We wanted to account for privileged, partitioned, designed, contemplative, glamorous, grotesque, and resistant spaces. And so we chose a range of essays that cut across gender, race, class, and geography: some critically examine public places of leisure and entertainment (inter-racial bars in the early 20<sup>th</sup> c. New York, and coffeehouse museums in 17<sup>th</sup> c. England), others question gains and failures of private domestic

spaces (in a German middle-class household and in Soviet communal apartments). Our issue juxtaposes gendered expression of religious architecture (Royal Abbey of Fontevrault in France) with the power relationships in taboo places (sex work in Cuba, women's urinals in 18<sup>th</sup> century England, and contemporary men's toilets in Australia). The two visual essays document spaces as diverse as an immigrant quarter in Paris, and a marginal beach in Tel Aviv.

## **Leisure Spaces**

Historian **Elizabeth Clement** examines inter-racial bars and night clubs in New York City in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. She demonstrates that the "unsegregated" north observed a variety of social codes and spatial arrangements by which bar owners could either encourage or discourage interracial dating. While the black proprietors of clubs in Hell's Kitchen in the 1910s used space to make transgressive interracial relationships possible, by the 1920s, the white-owned clubs of the Harlem Renaissance did the opposite. Clement argues that these clubs used space to re-enforce the increasingly strict vision of white supremacy that emerged in northern cities in the 1920s. Using spatial layout--and the arrangements of chairs and tables in bars--as her primary evidence, she shows how spatial relations both reflected and shaped race relations in the urban North.

**Angela Todd** demonstrates the role that 17<sup>th</sup> century coffeehouse museums played in shaping notions of "scientific value" in the public mind. Coffeehouses were contested public spaces in 17<sup>th</sup> c. England--sites for political debate as well as scientific debate--by men--and some coffeehouses were veritable showrooms for the detritus of English imperialism. Todd shows that, as discourses of rationality depend upon exclusions--of women, of silly men, of foolish collections--the 17<sup>th</sup> c. coffeehouse functioned as a kind of walk-in curiosity cabinet in which scientific and cultural oddities--including various versions of masculinity--were on display. Both in conjunction with and in opposition to "the museum," the primarily masculine performance space of the 17<sup>th</sup> c. coffeehouse therefore assumes a more prominent role in solidifying epistemological categories than has been previously assumed.

Mass communication scholar **Greg Young** reads the Sydney Opera House as the spatial manifestation of the reshaping of masculine--and national--identity in Australian culture. He argues that post-WWII Australian society, poised as it was to reinvent itself, was ready to incorporate the formerly "rejected feminine" and the latent homosociality of the Bush Legend into a new sense of national identity. Masculinity, and the bush legend in particular, was a contested site of cultural struggle in mid-century Australia; through the protracted period of its design and construction, the Opera House served as a lightning rod for cultural anxieties, and ultimately coming to embody Australia's new self-narrative of uniqueness and modernity.

## **Domestic Spaces**

**Elisabeth Kuhn**, a German-born American poet and scholar takes us to the site of her childhood. Already the title of her poem, "My Father's Kitchen," challenges our

expectations--kitchen is mother's--a hearth, a core of traditional patriarchal domesticity. In Kuhn's poem, the father is partially emasculated by the kitchen space, and partially the kitchen space is masculinized, upgraded by classical music and professional expertise on nutrition. Kuhn travels from her childhood memories, which could hardly be called nostalgic, to watchful adult contemplation. She is both a child looking up to her once intimidating daddy, and a wisened grown daughter, taking in her father's transformation brought by age and loss: he is the one who makes coffee for her now.

Different kinds of domestic spaces are investigated in **Erin Collopy's** essay about communal apartments in the writings of the two contemporary Russian female authors. Communal apartments appeared in Russia soon after the 1917 Revolution as the first harbingers of truly communal living. Such communal living was supposed to liberate women by taking the burden of domestic chores off their shoulders. Ironically, communal apartments were particularly hard on women: never liberated from domestic obligations (women continued working "second shift"), women now were devoid of privacy and scrutinized by self-appointed censors for both political compliance and moral character. Communal apartments were the bane of Soviet existence. Shared by several families, with two to three generations in the same room, communal kitchens and bathrooms often became contested territories. Life in communal apartments produced intimate bonds, as well as hatred, intrigues, and scandals.

Communal apartments occupy an important place in Russian-Soviet popular imagination. Ever since its inception, communal living was satirized by Soviet authors, and depicted in numerous dramatizations and films. However, these cultural expressions rarely, if ever, crossed the Russian border. Our issue introduces the understudied phenomenon of communal apartments and its literary representations to our international readership. Collopy's complex analysis lets us hear competing discourses about communal apartments: one nostalgic and sympathetic, emphasizing the sense of community and support among the neighbors; another harsh and surreal, emphasizing the degrading, dehumanizing nature of forced relationships in such apartments. We see this complexity, avoiding a defining verdict, as a particular strength of the essay.

## **Sacred Space**

Historian **Gabrielle Esperdy** examines the religious and architectural history of the Royal Abbey of Fontevrault, in Anjou, France. Her analysis shows the active and deliberate role that abbesses--for 700 years--played in shaping the physical and symbolic space of this female monastic community. Esperdy traces the development of the abbey through the administrative tenure of its powerful leaders, arguing that the design of the abbey was shaped *as* gendered space in order to reflect their spiritual and political aspirations. Well-aware of the didactic power of art and architecture, each abbess consciously remade the built environment, codifying the unique position of her gendered authority within the monastic realm. Until the moment in history when the abbey's aristocratic pedigree spelled its doom, the powerful Royal Abbey reflected then-contemporary aesthetic and religious values in a distinctly (female) gendered setting.

## Forbidden Spaces

In a nearly diametrically-opposed scenario, in which women less-empowered than abbesses are subject to the spaces around them, **Cynthia Pope** discusses the influence of the “global political economy of desire” on the construction of gendered spaces in Havana, Cuba. One of the results of globalization has been the rise in sex tourism throughout the world. This is particularly tragic in Cuba, where, despite forty years of gender equity laws and a highly educated population, sex work is once again the island’s key economic resource. Women are increasingly drawn to commercial sex work as a means for economic survival and access to dollars-only retail venues. But as Pope shows, these women are not passive victims of circumstance, but display resourcefulness in attempting to manipulate city-space to their (albeit) short-term advantage--a resourcefulness that testifies to their fortitude even as it reveals the overdetermined nature of their situation.

The overreaching goal of the essay by the UK-based architectural historian **Barbara Penner** is to push the boundary “of what one is allowed to speak about” academically, but she pursues this goal not only at the level of content, but also in the way she writes. Her academic narrative is interwoven with auto-ethnographic vignettes and snippets of email correspondence.

Penner investigates taboo subjects and spaces--urinals, lavatories, honeymoon suites. What she finds is that the conventions of bourgeois “good taste” trickled into academia and shape legitimate subjects of study. In her own research, Penner “pushes the envelope,” and in so doing, is disciplined by a variety of everyday practices. So Penner’s essay is meta-research; what it reveals is not so much about gendered spaces, as about doing research about these gendered spaces--a reflection that in and out of itself teaches us about the place of gender and sex in a society. What grows out of these seemingly amusing tidbits is a serious discussion of women’s studies in architecture, and the impact of feminism on this archetypically male discipline. Penner’s conclusions are not entirely pessimistic: as the unified and codified discipline of architecture gets fractured, there are more opportunities for gender, critical, and cultural studies to make an entry.

Australian researcher of the body and nudity, **Ruth Barcan**, offers in her essay an examination of an ultimate “dirty space”--men’s public toilets. She demonstrates how the powerful idea of “contagion” exerts a disciplinary influence over multiple modes of masculinities. Men’s public toilets function as a powerful instrument to contain and manage anxieties about sexuality, especially homosexuality. Using the tools of ethnography and critical re-reading of popular literary and media texts, Barcan demonstrates how such a mundane place as “the men’s room” embodies patriarchy: it excludes women, and it engages men in ritual bonding and hierarchical competition. Thus, she concludes, the gendered construction of this space leads to alienation of not only men from women, but also men from men.

## Documented Spaces

**Mary Ellen Wolf's** perceptive photography takes us to Paris--but do not think berets and accordions--rather, she takes us to an immigrant neighborhood near Gare du Nord. Her camera first captures a bird's eye panorama of the city--reflecting Paris the way it is fixed in the international tourist imagination; then slowly zooms in on the streets of La Goutte d'Or, its mosques, shops, and inhabitants; and then the camera pans to the turtle eye view of bare feet and long dresses of North-African women on the pavement of the neighborhood. Wolf's series of photographs demonstrates how this quintessentially European space has become hybridized and gendered. This transformation reflects the era of transnational migration grounded in European colonial history.

**Anat Litwin** presents the work of two contemporary Israeli artists. Their artwork was part of the exhibit she curated at the alternative art space and Jewish cultural center, Makor, in New York. The mixed media art by Merav Ezer presents traditional symbols of femininity, perhaps a *femme fatale*--high-heel shoes, cigarettes, fancy purse. Yet, all we see are disembodied traces of these objects, perhaps empty spaces left after the objects have been removed. The disconcerting images radiate otherworldly glow--they challenge our understanding of both presence and absence--are the objects there or not there? Is that a nostalgic tribute to the disappearing traditional femininity? Or rather, is it a ruthless look at the past, an expression of relief that these objects have vanished?

In contrast to Ezer's ephemeral art, the photographs by Yahezkel Lazarov are grounded in harsh Israeli reality. Even as his photographs represent life on the beach--a place often connoting carefree leisure--his camera captures what might as well be scenes of crime, violence, or pleasure. Whether he portrays police officers, children, or couples, the identities and relationships of the characters are ambiguous. They could be Israelis or Palestinians, friends or suspects, tourists or homeless. Equally ambiguous are relationships of the characters to the space they occupy (in Israel, quite literally).

By way of conclusion, we'd like to note that we edited this issue despite space, or more precisely, despite geography. One of us (Valerie Begley) throughout her work on the issue has lived in three different countries; another (Olga Gershenson) lived in the Northeastern US, first in Boston, moving later to Western Massachusetts. Meanwhile, our General Editor (Diana Fox) moved her family from Massachusetts to two different Caribbean nations. In one year's time, between us, we have traveled to over a dozen different countries throughout the world. We nevertheless managed to keep in touch with each other and with our internationally-located authors. We logged into our email accounts at our homes and offices, in hotel lobbies, airport lounges, and internet cafes. We kept working against the odds of nuisance of spam, problems with servers, and the vicissitudes of climate. Valerie brushed up against the tsunami; Olga was cut off from the world by the New England snow; Board member Ranjini Thaver, who assisted on this issue, endured hurricanes in her neighborhood. It would be an understatement to say that we have been preoccupied by spatiality throughout this editing process. All of our conversations, discussions, arguments, and resolutions took place (no pun intended) in virtual space. We've never heard each other's voices or seen each other's faces, yet we

haven't felt disembodied or disconnected. So, as we were working on issues of gender and space, and trying to consider the ways in which space matters, how it plays a crucial role in the construction of gender and power relations, we have observed the paradox that space has the potential to *not matter*, not because it doesn't influence us, but because we have agency (and technology) to transcend it.

We hope you enjoy the essays,

Valerie Begley  
Special Issue Editor

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Associate Editor